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EC76-549 Enriching your Relationships

Ron Daly

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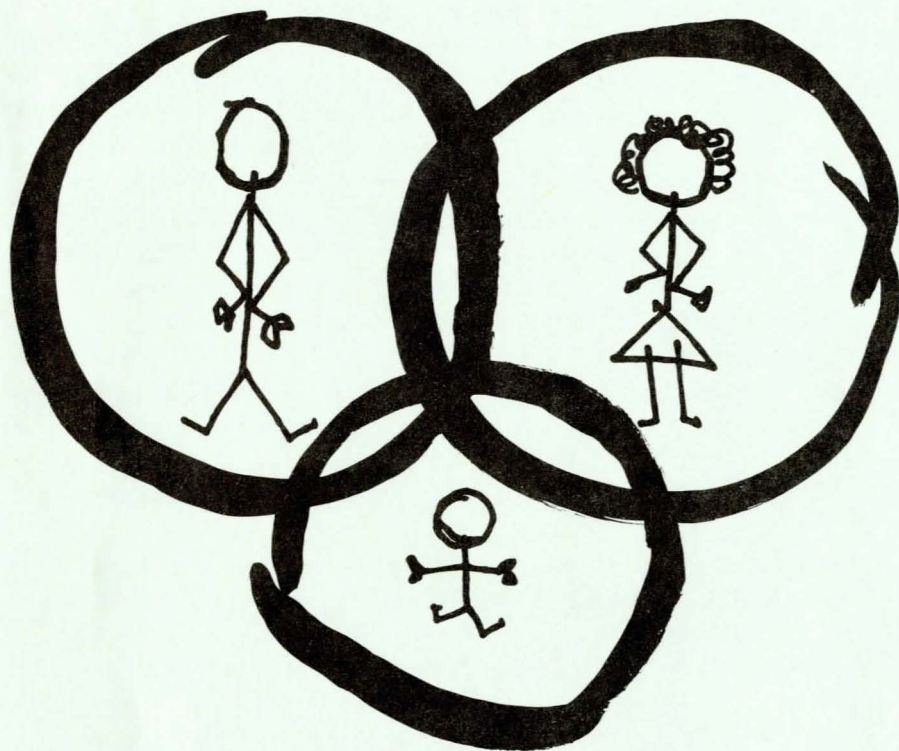
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Enriching Your Relationships!



EXTENSION WORK IN "AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS AND SUBJECTS RELATING THERETO,"
THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
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Enriching Your Relationships!

Enriching Your Relationships

By Ron Daly
Extension Specialist (Family Life)

There is nothing as rewarding as a meaningful relationship with someone you really care about.

This is true in the lives of children, teenagers, older persons, between husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and relatives. It's a universal experience sought and cherished by all people.

When I can share my hopes, my dreams with someone who gets excited about my excitement, it adds a new dimension to my life. If I can share my frustrations and fears with someone who understands and responds to me and my feelings in helpful ways, the frustrations of the day seem easier to handle.

On the other side there is nothing as hurtful and frustrating as a relationship with someone who is insensitive or uncaring. Or with a person who is unwilling to share in the relationship.

The degree to which a relationship is mutually satisfying to the people involved determines to a great extent the fruitfulness of that relationship. I would like to share with you those attitudes, understandings and skills which I have found useful in helping people enrich their relationships.

Communication a Prerequisite

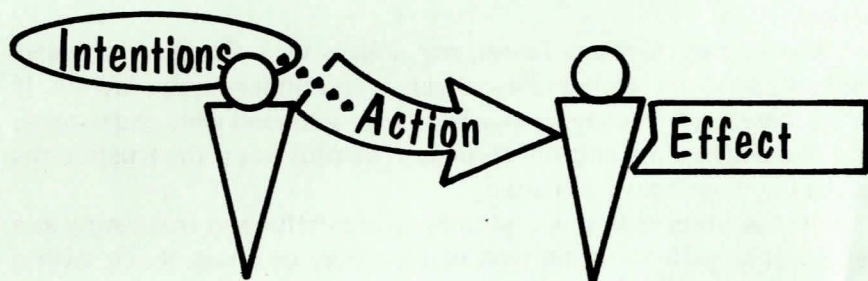
Open sharing of ideas and concerns is a prerequisite for enriching relationships. The greatest challenge that keeps us from having open communication with another person is that we are imperfect human beings—each with many needs, habits and styles which get in the way.

I would like to present some ideas I have found helpful in understanding how complex the communications process is.

A person has certain intentions or messages that he wants to communicate to another person. My intentions might be to get my wife to change some behavior that is very irritating or that is causing me a problem. On the other hand my intention might be to express my care, concern or appreciation of her as a person.

Intentions are within me and can't be seen by the other person. I have to take my *intentions* and put them into some type of *action*. Hopefully, the action will get the desired *effect*: if I want a change in my wife's behavior, that she will change; if it is to let her know I appreciate her, that it will have that effect.

Intentions—Actions—Effect



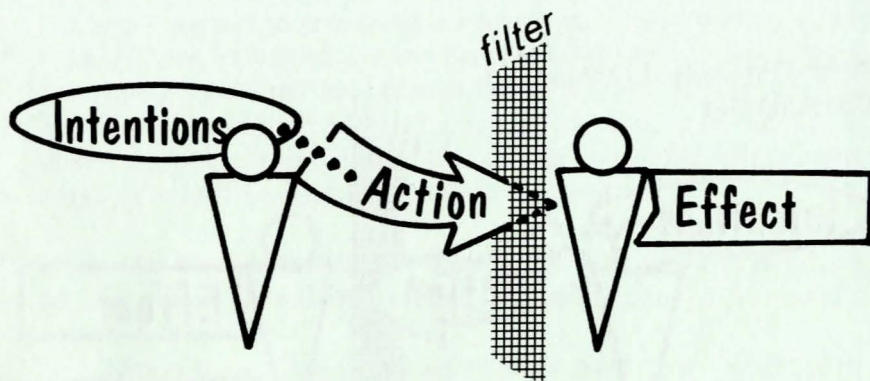
The problem is, before any message has an effect it must first pass through the other person's *filter*. There are several things in a person's filter through which a message must pass. One thing which may block a filter is what a person is experiencing that day.

For instance, if my wife just had a fight with a neighbor and our child comes home and shares a message with her, it may be very hard for my wife to listen and tune in to the child because feelings are lingering from the fight.

Pain can also be a filter that makes it difficult for you to hear a message. Have you ever had a sore toe? It's more difficult to listen when we're in physical pain or experiencing some kind of trauma.

Other things that can block our filters are past experiences with a person. Perhaps a word they send in a message raises a red flag in your mind. If they bring up the issue of money, this might be an area of conflict in your relationship; you don't hear anything that is said except the word "money." So your biases, your prejudices, your physical well-being, the interactions you have had with those around you—all of these are filters which could block a message being sent to you.

Filters



It is really important for each person in a relationship to identify personal biases, the kinds of things that keep them from hearing what another person is saying.

As a receiver you need to attend to the other person, to really listen with your eyes and ears. Yes, listen with your eyes. Much of what a person is expressing may be without words. It may be a facial expression, his eyes, clenched hands, body position or even how he is dressed. These don't convey the total message but they are cues we cannot afford to overlook if we want to respond in a helpful way.

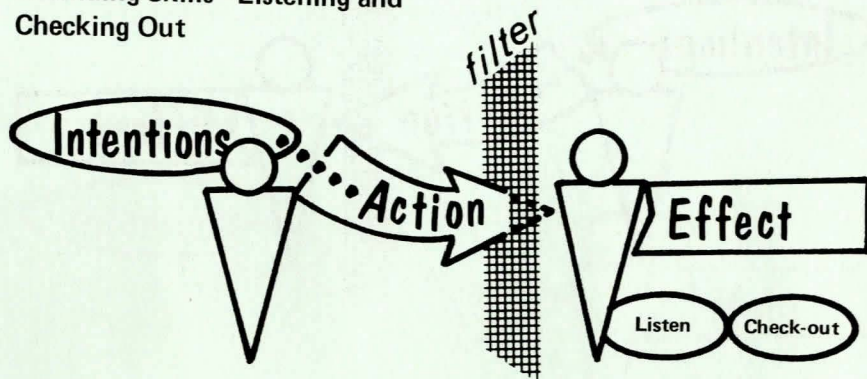
A person's tone of voice is another cue we want to be aware of. If a person says he is not angry, yet he shouts it out with his fists clenched, he is sending a double message. Or if a person says, "I'm having a great time," with little enthusiasm and with disinterest, he is also sending a double message. We need to *listen* to more than the content of the message. We need to focus on what the person is really feeling—as well as saying.

Another skill which is most helpful is called "Checking Out." If I don't understand what another person is trying to say, if I'm not sure of his intentions, I can ask, "Is this what you mean?" and then repeat my understanding. This provides the sender with the opportunity to clarify if there is a misunderstanding or to reinforce the point he is making and say, "Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

Many times we make assumptions based on very limited information and fail to check out the other person's real intentions.

The statement "Is this what you mean?" can do wonders to clear up misunderstandings.

Attending Skills—Listening and Checking Out



Another part of communication is when I am the sender. When I'm the sender I want to try first of all to send as *clear* a message as possible, recognizing there is a filter it has to go through.

If I want a certain effect, I have to send a clear message. Here is an example related by a participant in a couples workshop:

The day before the workshop I was engaged in activities that required me to stand on my feet from 9:00 in the morning till 3:00 in the afternoon. Then I came home and was on my feet preparing the evening meal. We had supper together and then there was the ironing to do. The ironing took me until 10:00 that evening. So I had been on my feet from 9:00 in the morning until 10:00 in the evening. I was exhausted and went up to go to bed, ready to go to sleep. I found my husband sitting in bed reading a book. I knew that was one way he could unwind, to lay there reading for awhile—but I was very tired and so I said to him, "Sweetheart, why don't we turn the light off and let's go to sleep?" He responded, "I'll just read for five minutes," and he tipped the lamp so the light wasn't shining in my eyes. I got into bed and was a little perturbed with him but didn't say anything. I

watched the five minutes drag by and as he continued to read I started to roll back and forth, giving him little nudges. Inside me the anger started to grow and it kept growing as he continued to read. Finally he turned off the light and went sound asleep. And that really infuriated me because now I was so angry I couldn't get to sleep, and there he was laying beside me deep in slumber. I ended up being angry at him because he continued to read and angry at myself because I couldn't go to sleep.

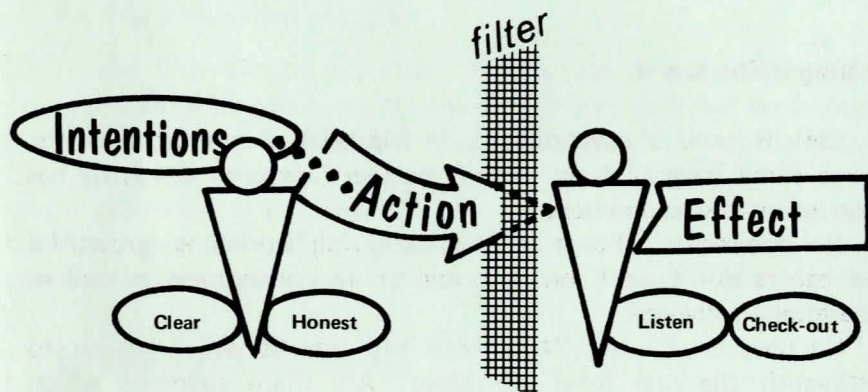
When she finished we started to explore some different kinds of things she might have done to meet her needs and her husband's needs at the same time.

In addition to sending clear messages we need to be *honest* with ourselves and others. This woman was exhausted and needed some sleep. She experienced a dilemma because she knew her husband was involved in his reading and used this as a means to unwind.

An honest response from her might be, "Sweetheart, I'm really exhausted and tired tonight. I've been on my feet since 9:00 this morning and I need to get some sleep. I know you enjoy reading and if you're not ready to go to sleep, would you please go into the other room to read tonight? I need the lights out—I'm dead tired."

The word "honest" means telling it like it is as far as possible. Let the other person know what you're experiencing and what you would like him to do.

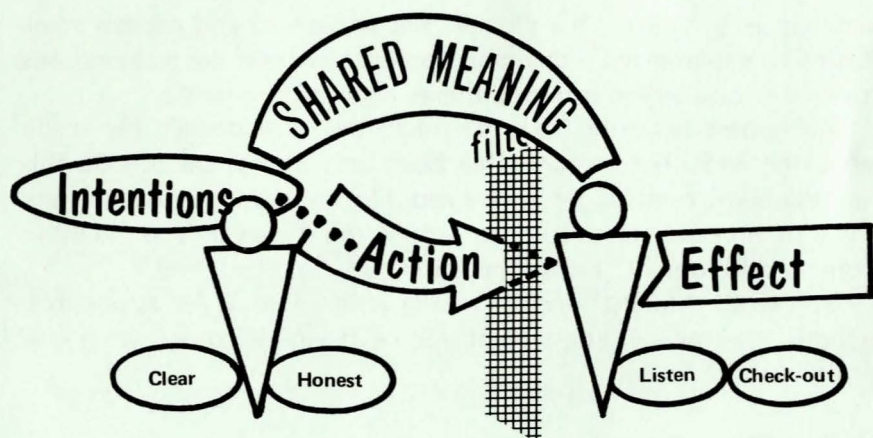
Sender— Clear— Honest



The communications process is taking our *intentions* and trying to translate them into *actions* that will bring about the desired *effects*, realizing that all of us have a *filter*.

As the sender we must send clear and honest messages, being aware of the filter of the other person. On the receiving side we need to really listen, and if we don't understand, to check out with that person.

If we do this, we arrive at shared meaning with each other. Shared meaning is really understanding what the other person is saying, being able to enter his world and experience his feelings and thoughts. Shared meaning is necessary to deal with the differences that exist in all relationships.



Sharing is The Key

Carl Rogers, a psychologist, in his book **Becoming Partners**, shares some insights from various partnerships with which he has been intimately acquainted.

He comments, "Some seemed satisfying, enriching, growthful and others don't work out and end up in unhappiness as well as separation or divorce."

He goes on to ask, "Are there any threads which appear to distinguish the one from the other? Are there elements which indicate that a relationship would be meaningful to both parties and

likely continue, or other elements which would point to the opposite outcome?" He then shares four threads that appear to be important.

1. Commitment

We each commit ourselves to working together on the changing process of our present relationship, because that relationship is currently enriching our love and our life and we wish it to grow.

He views a partnership as a continuing process, not a contract. The effort made is for personal as well as mutual satisfaction.

2. Communication

I will risk myself by endeavoring to communicate any persisting feeling, positive or negative, to my partner—to the full depth that I understand it in myself—as a living, present part of me. Then I will risk further by trying to understand, with all the empathy I can bring to bear, his or her response, whether it is accusatory and critical or sharing and self-revealing.

When this complex quality of sharing, risking and receptive communication exists even partially, you have increased the chances of permanence and happiness. One person can start the ball rolling. However, if communication remains continuously one-sided, the prospects for growth are dismal.

3. The Dissolution of Roles

We will live by our own choices, the deepest organismic sensings of which we are capable, but we will not be shaped by the wishes, rules and roles which others are all too eager to thrust upon us.

In marriages which seem enriching and satisfying, roles play a lesser and lesser part. If roles become a part of the relationship it is because the persons choose to make them, not because it is expected.

4. Becoming a Separate Self

Perhaps I can discover and come closer to more of what I really am deep inside—feeling sometimes angry or terrified,

sometimes loving and caring, occasionally beautiful and strong or wild and awful—without hiding these feelings from myself. Perhaps I can come to prize myself as the richly varied person I am. Perhaps I can openly *be* more of this person. If so, I can live by my own experienced values, even though I am aware of all society's codes. Then I can let myself be all this complexity of feelings and meanings and values with my partner—be free enough to give of love and anger and tenderness as they exist in me. Possibly then I can be a real member of a partnership, because I am on the road to being a real person. And I am hopeful that I can encourage my partner to follow his or her own road to a unique personhood which I would love to share.

In a partnership one of the most important factors making for a truly growing relationship may seem a rather paradoxical one. It is simply that when each partner is making progress towards becoming increasingly his or her own self, the relationship has a greater chance of becoming more enriching.

He adds the following caution, "If this kind of growth towards selfhood occurs only in one partner and fails to be encouraged or fostered in the other, then the increasing distance becomes awesome, and the partnership, without some sort of near miracle, is headed for the rocks."

As I reflect on the four threads shared by Dr. Rogers and review my learnings from watching people from all walks of life struggle to develop meaningful relationships I'm impressed with the thought, **sharing** is the key.

If I can open my life and let other people in, if I can be patient and not get caught up in judging or blaming, but really try to understand and experience the other person—then I build bridges and not barriers. I develop trust, not defensiveness. If I can feel good about myself, recognize my uniqueness and potential and continue to grow as a person, then I have something special and that will enrich the relationship.

Accent the Positive

Do you find yourself focusing on the faults of your children, spouse or friends? It's easy to do. My wife commented the other day,

"I know our kids are great kids. Why do I always seem to end up putting them down?"

It takes effort to avoid putting people down and to focus on the positive aspects of a person or a relationship. The results are worth the investment. Dr. Ernest Ligon in his book **Marriage Climate** challenges husbands:

Whether your wife is sparkling or temperamental is up to you.

He also challenges the wives:

Wives, everyone of you has two husbands, one whom God created and the other whom you created.

The fact is, the image you hold of your husband or wife is an important force in determining what kind of partner he or she will be. Resolve to spend more time and energy looking for the good in people and focusing on the positive aspects of our relationships. You do have a choice!

One Person Can Make a Difference

Whenever I speak to a group about ways they can enrich their relationships many people come up afterwards and say, "I sure wish my spouse or parents or kids were here." I can appreciate what they're saying and agree that it would be helpful.

However, the reality of life is such that it's difficult to get all the right people in the right place at the right time. But, you don't have to wait on someone else. There are things you can begin to do. If I want things to change in one of my relationships I need to begin with the one person who can do something about it. And that person is ME.

I'm not saying it will be easy and I'm not saying it will be immediate. The truth is that I have greater control over myself and my actions than over other people's actions.

A mother who participated in a parents workshop found it really made a difference when she changed her approach in dealing with her children.

My 11½-year-old boy is keeping a much cleaner room—is doing much less arguing. I'm reinforcing his good behavior by complimenting his efforts. I've also learned to accept less than good

work initially—where before I expected and criticized a job not perfectly done the first time.

My five-year-old is beginning to do things that need to be done—without my asking—simply because I've been more verbal and demonstrative in my positive reinforcers.

My 13-and 14½-year-olds have made their beds more routinely—even though they board the bus at 6:50 a.m.—since I've been laying a note on their bed thanking them.

I've tried to change my behavior by not letting myself get into situations of being too tired or rushed. Under these circumstances I begin to criticize, expect too much and vent my frustration on my children.

Again I repeat: it's not easy and there are no guarantees the other person will respond as you want. A genuine effort to let people know you care is hard to ignore. If old patterns or habits have become the routine, greater time and effort is required.

As I said at the beginning—there is nothing as rewarding as a meaningful relationship with someone you really care about.

If I can become sensitive to the complexity of the communication process; if I can really learn to give and receive, to share in meaningful ways; if I can deliberately look for ways to accent the positive in people—I can become a positive force in enriching the lives of those who mean the most to me.

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